

U.S. copyright law (title 17 of U.S. code) governs the reproduction and redistribution of copyrighted material.

PENDING - Lender

PCP



26714811

GENERAL RECORD INFORMATION Request Identifier: 26714811 Request Date: 20070118 OCLC Number: 30592666 Borrower: NJM Need Before: 20070215 Status: PENDING 20070118 Source: FSISOLL Renewal Request: Due Date: Lenders: THM, JNA, CTW, QWC, IUA Request Type: Copy	
BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION Call Number: Title: Journal of children's literature. ISSN: 1521-7779 Imprint: University Park, Penn.: Children's Literature Assembly, 1994 9999 Article: Richard Ammon "M. Jerry Weiss: The Johnny Appleseed of Young Adult Literature" Volume: 24 Number: 1 Date: 03/98 Pages: 98-102 Verified: MLAWorldCat Desc: v.: Type: Serial	
My Library's Holdings Information LHR Summary: 20-(Spring 1994-) Lending Policies: Unknown / Unknown Location: JNA Copy: 1 Call Number: PERIODICAL HARD COPY Format: unspecified	
Borrowing Information Patron: Laura Nicosia 295 Ship To: INTERLIBRARY SERVICES/SPRAGUE LIBRARY/ MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY/ONE NORMAL AVENUE/ MONTCLAIR, NJ 07043 Bill To: same Ship Via: US MAIL, ARIEL, FAX, CD&L delivery (Region I, #1376) Electronic Delivery: Maximum Cost: IFM - \$20.00 Copyright CCG Compliance: Billing Notes: FEIN 222-912-682; IFM	

130.68.126.49

1/15

1/23/07
JFC
BOUND

M. Jerry Weiss: The Johnny Appleseed of young adult literature

by Richard Ammon

An only child, Jerry was always an avid reader. He used to collect those fat Big-Little Books, and his parents also encouraged him to go to the library and check out books.

It's hard to believe that it was thirty years

ago when I journeyed from, then rural, Bucks

County (Pennsylvania) where I had taught el-

ementary school to urban Jersey City to become

an instructor at Jersey City State College. To

be so close to New York in the late 1960s and

under the tutelage of M. Jerry Weiss made for

some heady times. But no, he wasn't constantly

at my elbow, giving me pointers. In fact, he

pretty much left me alone to find my own way

in this new profession. Nevertheless, he left

his indelible impression on me that has lasted

a lifetime. But my story is not unique. There

are legions who can make similar claims.

It is not surprising, then, that Jerry Weiss

received the 1991 Arbutnot Award from the

International Reading Association for outstand-

ing teacher of children's and/or adolescent lit-

erature.

Yet, Newbery Medalist, Jerry Spinelli, re-

calls "staying at the Peachtree Hotel in Atlanta

in 1984 when (his) Little, Brown editor said,

"Jerry Weiss would like to have breakfast with

you."

"Who's Jerry Weiss?" he asked.

That's a good question: Who is Jerry

Weiss?

Born in Oxford, North Carolina, his fam-

ily lived in Chapel Hill until the third grade,

when they moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania.

An only child, Jerry was always an avid reader.

He used to collect those fat Big-Little Books,

and his parents also encouraged him to go to

the library and check out books. "That got me

into all kinds of trouble because I was allowed

to go into the adult section. I remember doing

a book report on Hemingway and his novels. I was called to the principal's office and asked whether my parents knew what I was reading. Didn't they know that his books had sex and unfit language? My parents didn't care as long as I was reading. They were too busy wrapped up in trying to make a living after the depression."

In 1944, he dropped out of his senior year

at William Penn High School in Harrisburg, and

joined the Navy. He served as a signalman on

a landing craft in the Pacific, hitting the beaches

at Okinawa, and Sai Pan. After the war he at-

tended Hershey Junior College to finish his high

school requirements. Then he enrolled in the

School of Journalism at the University of North

Carolina, later switching to English. While at-

tending the University of North Carolina, he

went to a dance at Greensboro College, a small

Methodist school. That's where he met Helen,

his wife of 47 years. He dated her off-and-on

for three years before they became engaged.

Jerry began his teaching career in Virginia

where he taught high school English. Learn-

ing that he still had some of his G.I. bill left, he

decided to enroll at Columbia University. He

intended to major in guidance counseling,

where he fell under the influence of Ruth

Strang.

Strang, recognizing Jerry's strong interest

in literature, advised him to take a course from

Frances Wilson, who was director of guidance

for the New York City public schools. "In a

class on group dynamics, she said that she

wanted students to write a play that could be

performed by kids and would provoke discus-

sion among parents and children. In other

words, she wanted the plays to focus on con-

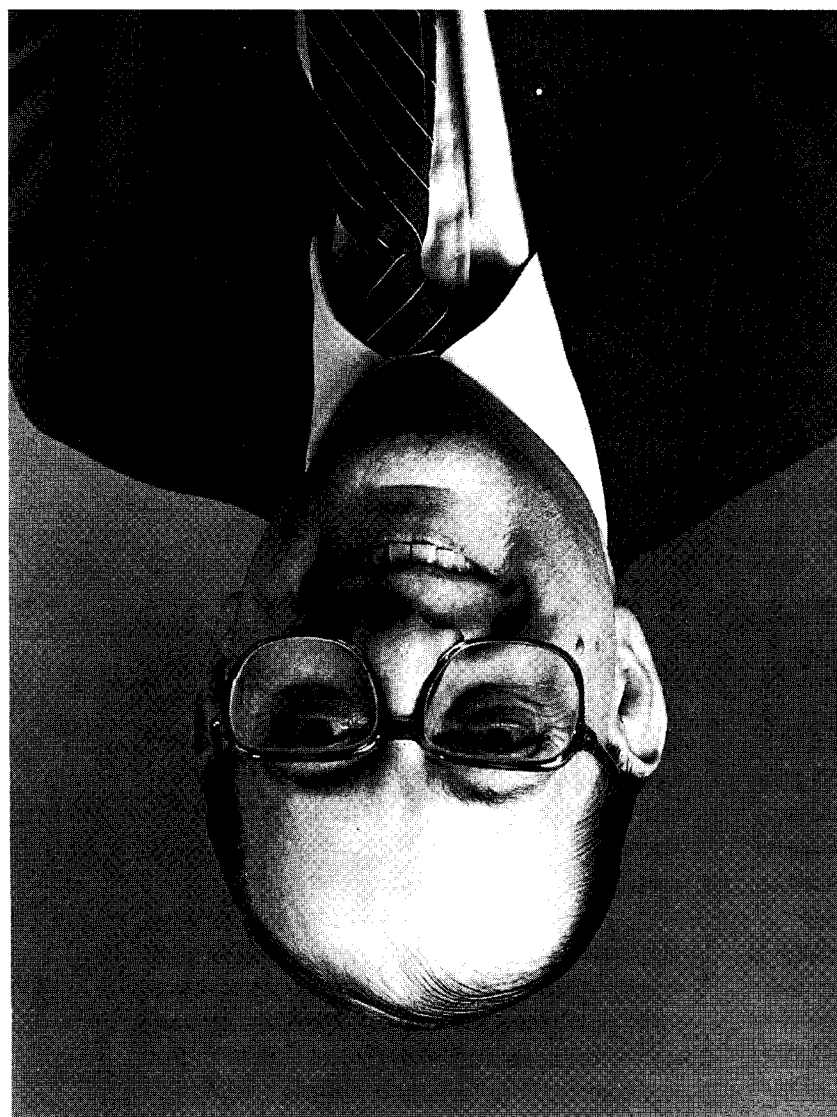
temporary social problems of youth but to have

no solution. So I wrote an open-ended play.

Frances Wilson arranged to have the high

school of performing arts produce it, and it trav-

M. Jerry Weiss



he taught with George and Nel Murphy, Lyman Hunt, and Jeannette Veatch. It was during his time at Penn State that he wrote *Reading in the Secondary Schools* (Odyssey, 1961).

In 1961, Jerry Weiss came to Jersey City where he has been ever since. For the past 29 years, Jerry and Helen have lived in a warm, two-story brick home on a tree-lined street in Montclair, New Jersey.

During World War II, Jerry became an avid reader of those paperbacks that were distributed free to servicemen. When he came home after the war, Pocket Books was the big company, and a man by the name of John Ware was director of marketing. He wanted to know what Jerry thought of their paperback line, and that's how Jerry became the first consultant to the paperback industry.

eled the PTA circuit. "In one play I mentioned a comic book. At some schools the whole discussion would be on whether comic books are good or bad for kids. They never got around to discussing what I had written. So I became immersed in reader response theory. I knew it deeply and firmly." Not only did these plays become the basis for his doctoral dissertation, but they were also seized by a publisher and published under the title, *Guidance through Drama* (Whiteside, 1954), launching his writing career.

Judith Gorog, an author who has spoken to his classes several times, made this observation of Jerry. "He's so passionate about the theater. He taught classes on theater, and took those kids from Jersey City across the river to see and hear what theater is." While Jerry continued to nurture his interest in theater, he also pursued the study of literature, receiving a grant from the New York City Board of Education to study potential drop-outs and their relationship to reading. He traveled to all the city schools, looking at cumulative records, talking to the guidance counselors, and meeting some of the students who were having problems. In a few schools he was

allowed to teach a small group of students and was fascinated to hear their perspectives on their reading ability, which weren't necessarily the same as their teachers'. He began to realize that maybe there was more to this reading game. Maybe, he thought, the problem with reading was that kids weren't interested in what they had to read.

Later, he taught at Rhodes, a private school, as a remedial reading teacher. These students were not necessarily wealthy. They simply were not succeeding in their regular schools. It was then that he moved into heavy use of trade books. "No workbooks. I was interested in getting paperbacks into their hands." A few years later he joined the English department at Defiance College. After a two-year stay, he moved his family to Penn State where

Begonia for Miss Applebaum (1989) is so different. "It's like saying Gary Paulsen has written only *Hatchet* (1987). If I had to pick my favorite Gary Paulsen book, I would choose *The Monument* (1991), which is so non-Gary Paulsen. I have nothing against *Hatchet*. I'd love for everybody to read *Hatchet*. But I want them to know that that's not the only genre he writes, that not every writer has to continue in one genre. Joan Lowry Nixon writes mystery, but she also writes historical fiction. Ann Rinaldi writes biographies as well as historical fiction. And God knows, how do you classify Avi? Comic books, adventures, scary stories, historical fiction. What about Katherine Paterson? Where do you classify her? I think everybody in young adult literature crosses over." For these courses, Jerry invites authors to come and speak to his students. Richard Peck, among countless other authors, appreciates this opportunity. "Jerry is the rare academic who believes that a class in young adult literature ought to be taught by the authors of the trade books. Practitioners are rarely as welcome in other academic grooves. His Jersey City College programs have become a Mecca for us all, writers and teachers and librarians who follow Jerry into the future to communicate with the literate citizens of the century lying dead ahead."

Nancy Springer vividly recalls Jerry inviting her to speak to his class. "I remember experiencing the New Jersey Turnpike as a physical manifestation of hell on earth, and Jerry as a welcoming angel at the end of this journey. "It was his warmth that impressed me the most. Jerry was taking a chance on a new, quite green children's book writer by inviting me, but he made me feel more than welcome; he made me feel cherished. It felt completely natural to be hugged by Jerry, as if he were my favorite uncle. I remember that he liked my presentation, which was nothing special, and he took me to a wonderful dinner to eat, a time-warped place shining with neon and streamlined aluminum. "It strikes me how thoroughly Jerry understood me as a writer. He did not take me to just any restaurant, because he did not just want to give me a meal; he wanted to give me an experience."

If you've ever heard Jerry speak, you can

John Mason, marketing director at Scholastic, said, "Jerry Weiss has devoted his career to tirelessly promoting the use of good children's and young adult literature by teachers. He is our (publishers') advocate, our bridge between the author and their audience."

Speaking in metaphor, Paula Danziger said, "Jerry Weiss is truly the 'Johnny Appleseed' of children's literature. Wherever he goes, he leaves behind seeds of learning about books, old and new; he leaves behind information about authors, both old and new; and he leaves behind excitement about the books and authors that allow teachers and librarians the chance to grow in knowledge and enthusiasm; and the chance to pass on all of that to others."

Young adult author, Richard Peck, added, "Though it's a full-time job in itself, Jerry Weiss is far more than the Godfather of Literacy. He and Helen reach far beyond themselves in the mission to bring young readers and books closer together at just that time in their lives when we've already lost most people to reading."

Norma Fox Mazer said that "what immediately comes to mind is his unwavering enthusiasm and love for children's and young adult literature. Steadfast, informed, ardent, he has given us—the writers and readers of these books—not only his considerable knowledge, but his heart."

Ironically, Jerry was banned from attending a state reading convention because he bravely called attention to the fact that no trade books, only text books, were displayed on the exhibit hall. Happily, he has been invited back for the association's anniversary convention. Annually, the New Jersey State Reading Association presents an award to an author whose book children in the state have voted as their favorite for that year. Fittingly, it's called the *Jerry Award* in honor of Jerry Weiss.

In his adolescent literature courses, which he still teaches even though he's retired, Jerry has given up having students read professional books. "I have them read 25 YA novels, instead. They won't know everything and won't know the history, but in that process they will at least have read books."

Jerry wants his students to know that Paul Zindel has written some 15-20 books on a variety of subjects. Jerry believes that it's not fair to type Zindel to *The Pigman* (1968) when a

hear his voice—in what author Judith Grogg describes as a nasal drawl—in the following except from “There’s a Song in the Air” (Weiss, 1994):

I have a great time thumbing through a (poetry) book, remembering, at times, the familiar stanza that have partially faded in my mind, but not in my soul. I no longer worry about grade levels. It is useless to think that certain poems are for certain age groups. The few words of a poem are arranged so specifically on a page and chosen so carefully by the poet to express an idea, a feeling, or to describe a character or some action that a poem can hit the brain (and sometimes the heart) as powerfully as a fully developed novel. (p. 46)

Jerry is a standardbearer at national conventions of the International Reading Association, the College Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). He is one of the driving forces of the Adolescent Literature Assembly of NCTE (ALAN). Ted Hipple, chair of the ALAN breakfast, said, “Jerry embodies professional-ism: intelligence, thoughtfulness, commitment, a sense of humor, and an extensive and intensive knowledge of his field, and his never-ending willingness to help others. All of us in NCTE are enriched by his presence.”

When it comes to one of his

causes, such as censorship, you can feel his passion with every word. As chair of the IRA Intellectual Freedom Committee, and chair of the NCTE Standing Committee on Censorship, Jerry speaks out against censorship every chance he gets. “Librarians aren’t selecting books on the basis of language or sexuality. They’re choosing books that they feel have relevance to some of the

kids in their schools.

“What is important is the realization that if kids are to become literate they have to understand that there are many, many groups out there, who express themselves in different ways. That we’re not a single language. We all don’t have the same values.”

That same fervor comes through in the following piece which appeared in *The ALAN Review* (Weiss, 1988):

We should argue for free access to information to all. A literate society knows and can imagine

Jerry is a standardbearer at national conventions of the International Reading Association, the College Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

from the information provided. People can talk to the animals. Cinderella will continue using her fairy godmother and friends to get her to the ball. Snow White will outwit the wicked step-mother, thanks to the help of the seven dwarfs, and Professor Higgins will continue to show us how to turn Eliza, the Covent Garden flower girl, into a beautiful lady. This is the stuff literature is made of. Let no one take it away from us! (p. 64)

Jerry has also edited a number of anthologies: *Tales Out of School* (1967), *The American Way of Laughing* (1977), and *From Writers to Students: The Pleasures and Pains of Writing* (1979). Most recently, he and Helen collaborated on a remarkable concept, *From One Experience to Another* (1997), in which authors of young adult literature contributed short stories about small episodes in their lives, which they hope will inspire students to consider incidents in their own lives as worthy topics.

Each of these books is an anthology, featuring works of authors of children’s and young adult literature. But that’s Jerry, always promoting others.

It is well known that Jerry helped launch Paula Danziger’s writing career.

Jerry: “Maria Schantz, an outstanding

young adult teacher at Montclair State, went on sabbatical, and I was asked to fill in one semester. When I got there Paula had already taken a course, and she asked if she could sit in.”

Paula: “I’d gone to Breadloaf Writer’s Conference for years (as poet John Ciardi’s babysitter). After my car accidents, I started to write and by the time I met Jerry, I had a completed draft of my book, and I knew that I wanted to show it to him. So I took the course and drove him a little nuts.”

Jerry: “She had a plastic pocket book that she kept opening and clicking, opening and

generous in sharing his knowledge and time with everyone."

Jerry Spinelli eventually learned the answer to his question. "Jerry Weiss is the best friend a children's book and its author can have. One of the signature scenes of our business is that of Jerry Weiss standing on the edge of a stage after a speech, flinging the books he has been lauding into the audience. That's Jerry—he keeps nothing but gives all to the world he loves."

References

- Danziger, P. (1975). *The cat ate my gymsuit*. New York: Dell.
- Hall, L. (1972). *Sticks and stones*. Chicago: Follett.
- Paulsen, G. (1987). *Hatchet*. New York: Viking.
- Paulsen, G. (1991). *The monument*. New York: Dell.
- Weiss, H., & Weiss, M. J. (1977). *The American way of laughing*. New York: Bantam.

Weiss, J. (1954). *Guidance through drama*. New York: Whiteside.

Weiss, J. (1961). *Reading in the second-ary schools*. New York: Odyssey.

Weiss, J. (Ed.). (1967). *Tales out of school*. New York: Dell.

Weiss, M. J. (Ed.). (1979). *From writers to students: The pleasures and pains of writing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Weiss, J. (1988). A dangerous subject: Censorship! *The ALAN Review*, 15 (3), 59-64.

Weiss, J. (1994). There's a song in the air. *The ALAN Review*, 21 (2), 46-48.

Weiss, M. J., & Weiss, H. (1997). *From one experience to another*. New York: Tor.

Zindel, P. (1968). *The pigman*. New York: Harper & Row.

Zindel, P. (1989). *A begonia for Miss Applebaum*. New York: Harper & Row.

Richard Ammon teaches children's literature at Penn State Harrisburg, and his book, *An Amish Wedding, will be published this fall*. An active member of CLA, he is chair of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children committee.

Jerry Weiss is the best friend a children's book and its author can have.

clicking, opening and clicking."

Paula: "I was ADD (attention deficit disorder) before people knew what ADD was."

Jerry: "And she had 57 magic markers. She would write in living technicolor. But then she'd leave them there."

Paula: "I was going for a Master's degree in Reading at Montclair State College and had already taken the course that he was teaching, but I wanted to take it again since I'd heard what a brilliant teacher he was."

Jerry: "Although she wasn't taking the course for credit, she read every book, and participated in class discussions."

"In one class I gave them a controversial

book to read, Lynn Hall's *Sticks and Stones* (1972). What happens when a group of kids starts picking on a kid who's a loner? This other guy spreads a rumor that this kid is homosexual. Anyway, they read the book, and one student said, 'I'd never let a kid read a book like this.' Talk about censorship! He was afraid this book might give a kid ideas."

"Paula became angry. She felt there was no reason not to have issues like this discussed. And she threw her pocketbook at him! I had to ask her to leave class for awhile."

"Paula came back at the end of three weeks. And I told her to write something. So she brought in the first chapter of something she'd already written. It was the story of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* (1975). I told her that if she finished the book, I'd get it published. It was so good. I took it to Dell and it was published. And that's the Paula story."

Paula: "Anyway, I showed him the book, and I'll never forget the day he came into class and talked about the book, about my writing, and how he was going to take it to Dell. Which he did." The rest is history.

"What makes Jerry tick?" his wife, Helen, wondered aloud. "It must be his incurable learning disability. He never has been able and he never will be able to say, 'No.' He is most